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Does Social Connection Turn Good Deeds into Good Feelings?: On the Value of Putting the  
"Social" in Prosocial Spending

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### Abstract

When are the emotional benefits of generous behavior most likely to emerge? In three studies, we demonstrate that the hedonic benefits of generous spending are most likely when spending promotes positive social connection. Study 1 shows that people feel happier after giving more to charity, but only when they give to someone connected with the cause. Studies 2 and 3 show that the emotional rewards associated with giving to friends or acquaintances are greatest in situations that facilitate social connection. Thus, social connection may be important for turning good deeds into good feelings, and maximizing connectedness between givers and recipients may enhance the emotional payoff of charitable initiatives.

**KEYWORDS:** Happiness; money; prosocial spending; social connection; well-being; donations; charitable giving; warm glow; social relationships; gift giving.

## Does Social Connection Turn Good Deeds into Good Feelings?: On the Value of Putting the "Social" in Prosocial Spending

Cause-related marketing has become increasingly ubiquitous, as one corporation after another links purchases of its products to charitable donations. Companies want to be associated with positive acts and the warm glow of giving (Andreoni, 1989; 1990) and such efforts can pay: socially responsible corporate initiatives can influence consumer choice and increase sales (Barone, et al., 2000; Lev, et al., 2010). Several notable cases suggest a role for a simple factor that influences that payoff: connectedness between the giver and the recipient. With the Pepsi Refresh Project, for example, PepsiCo allowed consumers to propose and vote for projects in their communities (such as cleaning up local rivers); PepsiCo then funded those projects, linking Pepsi to causes close to consumers’ homes – and hearts. While previous research has focused on how emotion affects consumers’ propensity to donate to charity or buy cause-related products (Kogut and Ritov, 2005; Small and Loewenstein, 2003; Small and Simonsohn, 2008; Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998), we explore the impact of connection not on the initial decision to give but on the subsequent emotional experience of the giver. Reaping the largest returns from prosocial acts requires an understanding of when and why charitable behavior has the biggest influence: what *kind* of giving most alters individuals’ affective responses and subsequent behavior?

### *The Emotional Impact of Giving*

One of the most reassuring aspects of human nature is that people not only behave generously toward one another in daily life, but often seem to enjoy doing so; for instance, people reap pleasure from doing volunteer work (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001), engaging in random acts of kindness (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005), and spending money on others (Dunn, et al., 2008,

2010). But do good deeds always produce good feelings? A recent review notes that “surprisingly, there is little *direct* evidence that helping others actually makes the helper feel good” (Dovidio, et al., 2006, p. 240). Indeed, much of the evidence is mixed. For instance, in one of the first papers examining the emotional consequences of prosocial behavior, Harris (1977) showed that helping a confederate search for a missing item led to an increase in happiness, but providing directions to a campus administration building did not. Similarly, Williamson and Clark (1989) found that assisting a confederate led to emotional gains when participants desired a communal relationship with the confederate, but not when they desired an exchange relationship.

We propose that emotional benefits are most likely when prosocial behavior facilitates positive social connection between the giver and recipient—and are less likely when such interaction is precluded. While engaging in prosocial behavior may not always lead to emotional gains, the literature on well-being has demonstrated that strong social relationships are one of the most robust and reliable predictors of happiness (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Indeed, quality social relationships appear necessary for achieving high levels of happiness (Diener and Seligman, 2002; Myers, 2000) and satisfying humans’ fundamental need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2000). If social relationships are such a strong predictor of well-being, it seems possible that prosocial behavior might increase happiness when it facilitates the development of social relationships through positive social connection.

Re-examining past research through this lens clarifies the seemingly variable relationship between prosocial behavior and happiness. Across investigations, prosocial behavior commonly produces hedonic gains when enacted in ways that allow for increased social connection, such as positive social interaction between the giver and recipient. As Williamson and Clark (1989)

suggested, helping someone search for a missing item may have provided more happiness than giving directions because the former experience provides more connection between benefactor and beneficiary. Furthermore, people tend to experience the largest emotional benefits from writing gratitude letters when they share the letter with the target (Lyubomirsky, 2008), which allows for greater positive social connection. Thus, greater emotional payoffs seem to transpire when good deeds involve social connection. Given the plausible but untested role of social connection, the present research examines whether social connection is important for experiencing the emotional rewards of generous behavior.

### Overview

To examine whether social connection is important for transforming generous behavior into positive feelings, we present three studies in which we manipulate levels of social connection while participants engage in prosocial spending. In Study 1, we examine whether the emotional benefits of charitable giving are greatest when people have the opportunity to donate to someone who is personally connected to the charity (vs. giving to someone who is not). In Study 2, we turn our focus to interpersonal giving and investigate whether giving more money in a dictator game leads to higher levels of happiness when participants deliver money to a recipient than when this donation is delivered via an intermediary, which blocks the opportunity for social connection with the recipient. Finally, in Study 3, we examine whether participants experience the highest happiness when they spend a gift card on someone else in a way that maximizes social connection. Taking an applied approach, we focus our examination on the broader conditions that moderate the emotional benefits of prosocial spending. We expect that the emotional benefits of generosity are most likely to emerge when prosocial spending provides an opportunity for positive social connection.

### Study 1: Charitable Giving

Study 1 explores whether donating to charity produces greater emotional benefits when givers have the opportunity for positive social connection with the beneficiary—or, as we examine here, with even a representative of the beneficiary. Although individuals may rarely have the opportunity for direct social connection with the end recipients of their charitable donation, people are often asked to give to charity by someone who is connected to the cause. For example, many food bank volunteers who solicit donations are individuals who care about hunger and poverty and may serve meals to the needy, but are not those in need of food themselves. Given that offering a donation to someone who cares about the cause provides an opportunity for social connection, we hypothesized that emotional benefits of prosocial spending would be amplified when people gave a donation to someone who was personally involved with the charity, such that the link between charitable behavior and subsequent happiness would be more pronounced in the presence of social connection.

#### Method

*Participants.* Sixty-eight individuals (54% female;  $M_{age} = 22.8$ ,  $SD = 5.7$ ) participated in this study in exchange for ten Canadian Dollars.

*Procedure.* Participants were approached in public places on a university campus and asked to complete a short study investigating how people evaluate charitable appeals. After providing consent, participants were paid for their participation and asked to put the payment away; we encouraged participants to put their payment away because doing so tends to increase the perception that payment for an experiment is equivalent in value to one’s own hard-earned cash (Raghubir and Srivastava, 2008). Participants then reported their pre-task general happiness

on a single-item measure (*Do you feel happy in general? 1-no, 5-yes*; Abdel-Khalek, 2006) and a two-item measure of the Subjective Happiness Scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ; SHS; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). We created a composite measure of baseline happiness by averaging standardized scores on these two measures, which were highly correlated ( $r = .59$ ; composite  $\alpha = .77$ ). Afterward, participants were presented with a print ad for a real charity called ACTS; they were informed that ACTS “is devoted to bringing fresh water to rural communities in Africa and sends many volunteers from North America to East Africa to help with this cause annually.” As participants examined this ad, the research assistant explained that previous participants who had seen this ad had asked if they could donate to ACTS, so they were welcome to make a donation.

Participants were then randomly assigned to the high or low social connection condition. In the high social connection condition, the research assistant (who was blind to our hypotheses) explained:

I am actually personally involved with this charity and even though we’re doing research on charitable appeals, I chose this charity because of my connection to this charity. My friend just got back from working with this organization in Africa and I’m helping to raise money on his behalf. So if you’d like to donate that would be awesome. Would you like to donate?

If the participant chose to donate, the research assistant accepted the donation, thanked the participant, and asked them to record their name and the donation amount on a record form.

Participants in the low social connection condition were not informed that the research assistant had a personal connection to the charity. Rather, the research assistant simply explained that any donation the participant chose to make would go to the charity. Before turning away



from the participant, the research assistant provided the participant with an envelope and instructed the participant to place any money they wished to donate in the envelope and then to drop the envelope in a collection box a short distance away. All funds collected went to the advertised charity.

After making their donation decision, all participants completed a final survey, reporting their positive and negative affect on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule ( $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = .86$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = .93$ ; PANAS; Watson, et al., 1988), their current overall happiness on a one-item measure (*1- not at all, 5- extremely*), and their life satisfaction on the Satisfaction with Life Scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ; SWLS; Diener, et al., 1985). Consistent with our previous research (Dunn et al., 2008) and the work of others (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012), we created a composite measure of well-being by averaging participants’ standardized scores on all positive scales: positive affect, current happiness, and life satisfaction, which were all positively correlated ( $r$ ’s from .20 - .59; composite  $\alpha = .86$ ).<sup>1</sup>

## Results and Discussion

Across studies, we measured the construct of subjective well-being using multiple scales. To maximize the breadth of our measures and the brevity of our paper we standardized and averaged each scale to create composite measures of well-being, which are reported in text. This strategy is consistent with previous research (e.g., Aknin et al., in press; Anderson et al., 2012) and helpful for assessing the full conceptualization of subjective well-being (Biswas-Diener et al., 2009; Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002; Kashdan et al., 2008), which cannot be captured in one single scale (Diener, 1984). In line with recent guidelines for maximizing transparency (Simmons, et al., 2011), we report results on each independent scale in tables.

Condition had no impact on the amount of money donated to charity, with participants giving roughly five dollars to charity in both the high social connection ( $M = \$5.07$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ ) and the low social connection condition ( $M = \$5.00$ ,  $SD = 3.40$ ),  $F(1, 66) = .01$ , *ns*. Our critical question, however, was whether the emotional benefits of generosity were greater when participants gave to someone who was personally involved with the charity, thereby enabling a positive social connection. To investigate this question, we centered donations to a mean of zero and coded condition assignment ( $-1$  = low social connection,  $1$  = high social connection). Then, we entered baseline happiness, donation amount, condition, and a Donation X Condition interaction term into a regression equation predicting post-donation well-being. As expected, baseline happiness ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the Donation X Condition interaction term ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were the only significant predictors of well-being ratings, suggesting that the impact of donation size on happiness depends upon whether the charitable donation is given in the high or low social connection condition.

We examined the relationship between donation size and post-donation well-being while controlling for baseline happiness in each condition. We found that larger donations were associated with higher well-being ratings in the high social connection condition ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not in the low social connection condition ( $\beta = -.33$ ,  $p = .10$ ). As predicted, the link between giving and subsequent happiness was strongest when participants gave the donation directly to someone who was personally connected to the charity (Figure 1; see Table 1 for results on each individual measure). Given that participants in the low social connection condition were also committing prosocial acts, it is striking that the relationship between donation size and life satisfaction was negative (though not significantly so), highlighting the critical role of social connection in producing positive feelings from giving.

## Study 2: Classroom Dictator Game

Using a paradigm that mirrors common real-world instances of charitable giving, Study 1 provides initial evidence for the role of social connection: people who donated more money to charity experienced higher well-being afterward only if they gave their donation to a charitable representative who was personally connected with the cause. Although giving to charitable organizations is common, people more often give to other *individuals*, including friends and acquaintances (Dunn et al., 2008). To generalize the role of connection to interpersonal contexts, Study 2 used a dictator game paradigm in which we paid participants \$10 and let them decide how much of their payment to give to a peer. We manipulated whether participants delivered the money to the recipient personally (enabling brief social connection) or through an intermediary (precluding social connection). Our account suggests that the emotional benefits of prosocial spending are most likely to occur when generous acts provide positive social connection between the giver and recipient; therefore, we predicted that greater generosity would predict higher levels of happiness only when givers were allowed to interact with recipients.

### Method

*Participants.* Forty-eight undergraduates (63% female;  $M_{age} = 23.0$ ,  $SD = 5.7$ ) participated in exchange for a chocolate bar.

*Procedure.* Participants reported their pre-task general happiness on the same single-item pre-task measure as used in Study 1 (Abdel-Khalek, 2006). Half the participants were then informed that they had been randomly assigned to the decision maker role in a dictator game, and were given ten one-dollar Canadian coins as additional compensation for participation.<sup>2</sup>

Decision makers were told that they had each been randomly paired with a fellow student, who

had not received any money, and that they should decide how much money to keep and how much (if any) to give this other student. We manipulated the degree of social connection that this transaction allowed by informing half of the decision makers that they would personally deliver the funds to the recipient (high social connection condition), and informing the other half that a research assistant would deliver the funds on their behalf (low social connection condition). Decision makers placed whatever amount they wished to donate (from \$0-\$10) in an envelope and gave the donation directly to the recipient or to the research assistant who delivered the funds. All participants then reported their current happiness on the same one-item post-task measure used in Study 1 and their current positive and negative affect on the PANAS ( $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = .83$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = .89$ ; Watson, et al., 1988). Consistent with Study 1, we created a composite measure of post-donation happiness by averaging standardized scores on positive scales – positive affect and current happiness – which were positively correlated ( $r = .25$ ; composite  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results and Discussion

In line with Study 1, decision makers gave away approximately half their windfall to their paired recipient, regardless of whether they were in the high ( $M = \$5.50$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ) or low social connection condition ( $M = \$5.25$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ),  $F(1, 22) = .05$ , *ns*. Again, our primary interest was in whether the emotional benefits of generosity were greater when donations were made in person. As in Study 1, we centered donations to a mean of zero and coded condition assignment ( $-1 = \text{low social connection}$ ,  $1 = \text{high social connection}$ ). We then entered pre-task happiness, donation amount, condition, and a Donation X Condition interaction term into a regression equation predicting post-task positive affect. The interaction term was the only

significant predictor of positive affect ( $\beta = .47, p < .05$ ), indicating that the impact of donation amount on positive affect may depend upon the level of social connection.

We split decision makers into high and low social connection groups and entered pre-task happiness and donation amount as predictors of post-task positive affect. In line with our predictions, larger donations were associated with higher post-task positive affect in the high social connection condition ( $\beta = .83, p < .005$ ), but this effect was again eliminated – and reversed – in the low social connection condition ( $\beta = -.60, p < .01$ ). Thus, giving larger donations appears to produce higher levels of positive affect (above and beyond baseline levels of happiness), but only when a social interaction took place between benefactor and beneficiary (Figure 2; see Table 2 for results on each individual measure).

### Study 3: Starbucks Gift Cards

Study 2 replicated the importance of social connection for the emotional benefits of giving and extended these findings to the realm of interpersonal giving; people who made more generous financial decisions experienced more positive affect afterward if they were allowed to interact with their beneficiary. While this design allowed us to investigate our hypothesis in a controlled context, the artificiality of this paradigm represents a limitation. Therefore, in Study 3, we conducted a field study to examine the emotional consequences of generous spending in a more naturalistic setting.

Study 3 also allowed us to address two additional limitations of Studies 1 and 2. First, in both studies, the opportunity for social connection was confounded with social recognition of committing a kind act: in the high social connection condition, the benefactor could both interact with *and* receive positive recognition from the beneficiary, whereas there was no such

opportunity in the low social connection condition. Second, donation sizes were not randomly assigned; participants were allowed to decide how much money to give away to charity (Study 1) or peers (Study 2). Therefore, in Study 3, participants were instructed to give the same gift (a Starbucks gift card) directly to someone else, while we manipulated the degree of interaction between giver and recipient. Finally, in Study 3 we examined happiness at the end of the day, rather than immediately after the prosocial spending experience.

## Method

*Participants.* Fifty-eight individuals agreed to participate in a study on gift card spending. Eight of these participants – evenly dispersed across conditions – could not be reached for follow-up calls and were removed from analyses, leaving a final sample of fifty participants (66% female;  $M_{age} = 21.0$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ).

*Procedure.* Participants were approached in the morning on campus and given a Starbucks gift card valued at \$10 Canadian to use by the end of the day. In a 2 (spending type: personal vs. prosocial) X 2 (social connection: high vs. low) design, participants were randomly assigned to spend the gift card on either themselves or someone else in a way that either minimized or maximized social connection (Table 3). Specifically, participants who were told to use the card to benefit someone else were instructed either (a) to give the gift card in its entirety to someone else as a gift and not to accompany the recipient to Starbucks, thereby minimizing social connection, or (b) to visit Starbucks with this person and spend the gift card on both themselves and the recipient, thereby maximizing social connection. Participants who were told to spend the card on themselves were instructed either to (a) go to Starbucks by themselves, or (b) go to Starbucks with a friend but to spend the gift card only on themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Participants were contacted in the evening by a research assistant, blind to condition, and rated their current positive and negative affect on the PANAS ( $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = .80$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = .83$ ; Watson, et al., 1988), overall happiness on the SHS ( $\alpha = .77$ ; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999), and life satisfaction on the SWLS ( $\alpha = .86$ ; Diener et al., 1985). Again, we created a composite of well-being by averaging participants’ standardized scores of positive affect, overall happiness, and life satisfaction ( $r$ ’s from .09 - .57; composite  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results and Discussion

We predicted that participants would experience the highest levels of happiness when they spent the gift card on someone else in a way that maximized social connection. To test this question, we first used a 2 (spending type: personal vs. prosocial) X 2 (social connection: high vs. low) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results revealed a non-significant main effect of spending type  $F(1,46) = 0.68, p > .40$ , a non-significant main effect of social connection  $F(1,46) = 2.32, p > .12$ , and a non-significant interaction  $F(1,46) = 1.32, p > .25$ . Given our specific prediction, however, we used a planned contrast to analyze well-being with weights reflecting our hypothesized pattern, as shown in Table 3. As expected, this contrast was significant,  $t(46) = 2.01, p = .05$ , demonstrating that participants randomly assigned to spend the gift card on someone else by going to Starbucks with that individual were significantly happier at the end of the day than participants in the other three spending conditions (Figure 3; see Table 4 for results of each individual measure).<sup>4</sup> Thus, participants who spent on others in a way that allowed for social connection experienced the highest levels of happiness at the end of the day.

Using a field study designed to mimic everyday spending behaviors, Study 3 provided additional support for our hypothesis that the emotional benefits of spending are greatest when

people spend on others in a way that facilitates social connection. That said, asking participants to engage in everyday spending behaviors allows for several confounds. For instance, participants who gave the gift card as a gift may have exerted less effort, since they did not actually go to Starbucks themselves; many of the confounds present in this field study, however, are absent from the more controlled Study 2. Taken together with Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 supports our hypothesis that spending leads to the greatest hedonic benefits when people engage in prosocial spending that promotes positive social connection.

### General Discussion

Across three studies, we found support for the hypothesis that social connection is important for transforming good deeds into good feelings. In Study 1, we showed that participants who gave larger donations to a charitable organization reported higher levels of happiness after doing so when they gave their donations directly to someone who was connected to the charity. In Study 2, we found that participants who gave more money to a recipient were happier when they delivered the funds directly to the beneficiary; participants did not experience the emotional benefits of giving when this same transaction was performed by an intermediary, thus inhibiting social connection. Finally, in Study 3, participants who spent a Starbucks gift card on someone else, and spent time with that person while doing so, were happiest at the end of the day, again suggesting that prosocial spending that allows for positive social connection leads to higher levels of happiness. These findings help to clarify the inconsistent support for the claim that prosocial behavior leads to an increase in well-being by demonstrating that *how* good deeds are enacted is important for understanding when emotional benefits are experienced.



While alternative explanations for each individual study are easy to generate, the results of all three studies presented here can be most parsimoniously explained by the hypothesis that positive social connection is important for reaping the emotional benefits of generous financial behavior. Although we did not directly assess levels of social connection in each study, we used face-valid manipulations that approximate socially connected giving opportunities in daily life. Indeed, in Study 1 we were interested in the consequences of direct social connection with a charity representative. Thus, we reasoned that having some participants give a donation to an experimenter who made it known that she had a personal connection to the cause while having other participants donate through the same experimenter without her disclosing her connection would allow us to test this question. Similarly, in Study 2 we were interested in the consequences of direct social connection with a beneficiary and therefore included one condition with social interaction and one without. Finally, in Study 3 we used face-valid manipulations of social connection by asking participants in the high social connection condition to spend time with their beneficiary. These manipulations are consistent with previous work examining the consequences of meaningful contact with a beneficiary (Grant et al., 2007).

Although it is conceivable that demand characteristics may have affected our results, we think they are unlikely to account for our findings for several reasons. First, if participants were trying to please the experimenter by reporting higher levels of happiness after giving more money to others, we would expect to see a positive relationship between donation size and happiness in both conditions of Studies 1 and 2. However, we see that larger donations lead to higher levels of happiness only when donations are given directly to the beneficiary or representative. Moreover, it is unlikely that our results are due to demand effects because previous work has shown that people do not believe that spending money on others produces

greater happiness than spending money on oneself (Dunn et al., 2008). In addition, it is unlikely that researchers were shaping participant responses; in Study 3, the research assistant assessing happiness at the end of the day was blind to condition assignment, meaning they could not influence happiness reports. Thus it is unlikely that the higher levels of happiness seen after socially connected prosocial spending reflect demand effects from the participant or experimenter.

Employing three of the most widely used happiness scales, our studies demonstrate that the effects of prosocial spending on happiness may differ depending upon the degree of social connection between the benefactor and beneficiary. These results are particularly striking given the similarity of the behaviors enacted in Studies 1 and 2. That is, when participants had the opportunity to decide how much money to give to charity or another participant, donations were nearly indistinguishable in the high and low social connection conditions (\$5.07 vs. \$5.00 in Study 1 and \$5.50 vs. \$5.25 in Study 2). Yet, generous behavior produced drastically different emotional consequences depending on the degree of social connection the situations allowed.

While our investigation focused on the emotional consequences of direct interpersonal giving, a growing body of research suggests that a similar relationship between giving and well-being may exist at the macro-level as well. Indeed, looking across nations, Oishi, Schimmack and Diener (2012) demonstrate that residents in countries with higher progressive taxation are happier than residents in countries less progressive taxation, even while controlling for important variables such as income inequality and national wealth. More directly, Arvin and Lew (2010) assessed the link between prosocial spending and well-being at the national level by surveying foreign aid and citizens’ happiness levels in nine donor countries. Their findings suggest that the amount of foreign aid distributed by a nation may predict donor citizens’ happiness (see also

Arvin and Lew, 2009). While the results were only significant in one European nation (France), this may be due, in part, to the fact that foreign aid was disbursed to countries that citizens did not feel connected to. Indeed, it is possible that citizens in donor nations would feel happier if aid was given to a country that many citizens feel connected to, such as a country where many citizens have travelled. One implication of our research is that foreign aid is likely to lead to the greatest well-being benefits when donors feel psychologically connected to the recipients of their aid.

Because our goal was to understand the broad conditions that moderate the emotional benefits of prosocial spending rather than isolate the specific mechanisms responsible, we manipulated social connection in ways that parallel real giving opportunities. For example, although most major charities allow people the convenience of making donations online, one of the most common reasons people give to charity is that they are asked for a contribution by someone they know (Independent Sector, 1999), who may be connected to the charity. This latter form of socially connected giving differs from the former in multiple ways, including anonymity, social pressure, the likelihood of a positive social interaction, and the opportunity for a direct expression of gratitude. We designed our high and low social connection conditions to mimic these real world contexts by including many of the features that socially connected giving entails; further investigation is needed to identify the specific aspects of social connection that might yield the largest emotional rewards in particular giving situations.

Importantly, our research suggests that happiness is not an inevitable outcome of prosocial spending; generosity produced the greatest happiness benefits when positive social connection was facilitated. This yields important practical implications for both individuals and philanthropic organizations. A simple way to apply this research may be to use one’s prosocial

spending experiences as opportunities for positive social interactions with the beneficiary of one’s gift. For example, if you choose to buy your niece a basketball for her birthday, you would be more likely to experience a happiness boost from taking the time to shoot some hoops with her rather than simply mailing the ball to her as a gift. Similarly, our findings suggest that charities should strive to increase the interpersonal connection between donors and beneficiaries, such that donors experience an emotional boost from giving. For instance, one author recently gave her mother a gift certificate to DonorsChoose.org, a charity that funds various public school classroom projects across the United States. After helping a third-grade classroom fund an art and reading project, the author’s mom received hand-written thank-you cards from the students and teacher who benefitted from her donation. The personalized messages increased the social connection between the donor and beneficiary, making the donation more rewarding and potentially increasing the likelihood that she will give again. Indeed, previous research suggests that when people experience greater happiness after giving they are more likely to act generously in the future (Aknin et al., 2011). Thus, social connection may not only make the initial generous act more rewarding, it may also encourage subsequent donations and initiate a positive feedback loop between giving and happiness.

### Conclusion

The present research provides the first direct investigation of whether social connection acts as a moderator in transforming generous behavior into positive feelings. Examining this hypothesis in three contexts designed to map instances of real-world giving, we find that financial generosity leads to the largest happiness gains when acts of giving involve increased social connection with a representative of the recipient (Study 1) or with the recipients themselves (Studies 2 and 3). Our findings dovetail with research suggesting that positive social

interactions, expanded social networks, and reduced isolation mediate the emotional benefits of volunteer work (Musick and Wilson, 2003). While additional factors other than social connection likely influence the happiness gained from prosocial spending, our findings suggest that putting the *social* in prosocial is one way to transform good deeds into good feelings.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although negative affect was not the focus of the present research and reported levels of NA were typically quite low, the results on NA for all studies are provided in the tables for interested readers.

<sup>2</sup> Participants signed a receipt to acknowledge this payment and ensure a sense of ownership.

<sup>3</sup> To confirm that our four conditions were ecologically valid, we asked an additional sample of 40 undergraduates to report how frequently they engaged in the four types of coffee buying behaviors assigned in Study 3. Participants reported that they engage in all four types of spending behavior at least 10% of the time. We also confirmed that buying a coffee for oneself while with others, an experience that some may consider awkward, represents a familiar spending behavior. When participants were asked to rate how common or uncommon this spending behavior is on a 7-point likert scale (*1 – very uncommon, 7 – very common*), participants rated this behavior significantly above the midpoint ( $X = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ),  $t(39) = 4.54$ ,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>4</sup> Given that past research has shown a link between social interaction and happiness (e.g., Watson, Clark, McIntyre and Hamaker, 1992), it is likely that participants experienced increased positive mood immediately after visiting Starbucks with a friend, even in the absence of prosocial spending. We expected the hedonic effects of this single interaction to last through the end of the day – when happiness was assessed – only when coupled with the positive benefits of prosocial spending.

Table 1. Results from Study 1 on individual measures of well-being.

	Donation X Condition Interaction	Simple Effects	
		Low Social connection	High Social connection
Baseline measure: 1-item General Happiness <i>Post-donation measure</i>			
SWLS	$\beta = .31, p < .02$	$\beta = -.22, p = .25$	$\beta = .31, p = .06$
PA	$\beta = .21, p = .13$	$\beta = -.25, p = .26$	$\beta = .11, p = .50$
1-item Happiness	$\beta = .33, p < .02$	$\beta = -.34, p = .11$	$\beta = .29, p = .08$
NA	$\beta = -.21, p = .12$	$\beta = .10, p = .65$	$\beta = -.28, p = .09$
Baseline measure: 2-item Subjective Happiness Scale <i>Post-donation measure</i>			
SWLS	$\beta = .23, p < .05$	$\beta = -.29, p = .11$	$\beta = .18, p = .13$
PA	$\beta = .21, p = .15$	$\beta = -.22, p = .28$	$\beta = .12, p = .47$
1-item Happiness	$\beta = .35, p < .02$	$\beta = -.38, p = .07$	$\beta = .25, p = .13$
NA	$\beta = -.17, p = .20$	$\beta = .11, p = .59$	$\beta = -.21, p = .17$

*Table 2.* Results from Study 2 on individual measures of post-donation well-being.

	Interaction	Simple Effects	
		Low Social connection	High Social connection
Baseline measure: 1-item General Happiness			
PA	$\beta = .43, p < .04$	$\beta = -.52, p = .13$	$\beta = .68, p < .02$
1-item Happiness	$\beta = .32, p = .06$	$\beta = -.42, p = .07$	$\beta = .63, p < .01$
NA	$\beta = .02, p = .94$	$\beta = -.19, p = .62$	$\beta = -.01, p = .98$

Table 3. Spending directions and contrast weights the four conditions in Study 3.

		Social Connection	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Gift Card Target	<i>Oneself</i>	Please use this \$10.00 Starbucks gift card to buy yourself a coffee/treat while alone.	Please use this \$10.00 Starbucks gift card to buy yourself a coffee/treat while visiting Starbucks with a friend.
		Contrast Weight = -1	Contrast Weight = -1
	<i>Someone Else</i>	Please give this \$10.00 Starbucks gift card to someone else as a gift.	Please use this \$10.00 Starbucks gift card to buy yourself and someone else a coffee/treat to have while visiting Starbucks.
		Contrast weight = -1	Contrast weight = +3

Note: Participants were given a thorough explanation of their condition instructions in person, with the brief summaries above provided in writing as reminders.

Table 4. Results from Study 3 on individual measures of well-being.

	Means (Standard Deviation)				Contrast Value
	<i>Target: Self</i>		<i>Target: Other</i>		
	<i>Connection: Maximum</i>	<i>Connection: Minimum</i>	<i>Connection: Maximum</i>	<i>Connection: Minimum</i>	
SHS	4.84 (.84)	4.88 (.66)	5.34 (1.02)	4.46 (1.00)	$t(46) = 2.12, p < .04$
SWLS	4.79 (1.33)	4.70 (1.09)	5.45 (.90)	4.84 (.72)	$t(46) = 1.91, p = .06$
PA	2.81 (.67)	2.70 (.44)	2.83 (.51)	2.78 (.70)	$t(46) = 0.34, p = .73$
NA	1.47 (.57)	1.45 (.60)	1.41 (.24)	1.45 (.39)	$t(46) = -0.25, p = .80$

### Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Donation size (centered to a mean of zero) and social connection interact in predicting the emotional rewards of charitable giving while controlling for baseline happiness (Study 1). Larger donations lead to higher levels of happiness in the high social connection condition but not in the low social connection condition.

*Figure 2.* Donation size (centered to a mean of zero) and social connection interact in predicting post-donation well-being while controlling for baseline happiness in the dictator game (Study 2). Larger donations lead to higher levels of happiness in the high social connection condition but not in the low social connection condition.

*Figure 3.* Happiness levels reported after gift card spending in each of the four conditions in Study 3 on composite measure of well-being.







